

THE GIRL ORATOR OF THE BOWERY: ELIZABETH GURLEY FLYNN, IRELAND AND THE INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD

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INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD

THE GIRL ORATOR OF THE BOWERY:



ELIZABETH GURLEY FLYNN, IRELAND AND THE INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD

The bitter class warfare witnessed in Dublin in 1913 mirrored a series of similarly vicious struggles in the United States. Meredith Meagher outlines the part played in several of them by the charismatic Irish-American labour leader Elizabeth Gurley Flynn.

Above: Elizabeth Gurley Flynn speaking in Paterson ('Silk City'), New Jersey, in May 1913.

On 25 May 1913 Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, an organiser and 'soapboxer' for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), addressed 25,000 striking silk workers and their supporters at an open-air meeting near Paterson, New Jersey. The 'Silk City' contained over 300 textile mills that employed many immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. Christened the 'Anarchistic Joan of Arc' by the *New York Times*, the 22-year-old Flynn had already led several strikes across the United States with the IWW (popularly known as the 'Wobblies'). Flynn was awaiting trial for 'inciting riot' along with other prominent Wobblies, including its chieftain, 'Big' Bill Haywood, the notorious Italian anarchist Carlo Tresca and Limerick-born Patrick L. Quinlan. Flynn and the IWW remind us of the international aspect of American labour history—the appeal of the 'girl orator of the Bowery' transcended lines of ethnicity, as well as gender and class. Yet Flynn's life and work—particularly her association with James Connolly—also speak to the Irish dimension of the global phenomenon of industrial unrest in the years prior to the Great War, culminating in events such as the Paterson Strike and the Dublin Lockout.

James Connolly and the ISF

Flynn met James Connolly in 1907 at a meeting of the Socialist Labor Party in New Jersey. At the time, Connolly lived in Newark and worked at the nearby Singer Sewing Machine Company. He organised for the IWW and soon moved to a Bronx flat near Flynn's family. Connolly's ability to inspire multilingual audiences impressed Flynn. Her memoirs describe how Connolly electrified a meeting of Italian socialists, who overlooked his Glaswegian inflection on their native tongue, applauding him with cheers of 'Viva!' Along with Patrick L. Quinlan, Flynn and Connolly founded the Irish Socialist Federation (ISF) in New York in 1907. The ISF declared that it would 'assist the revolutionary working-class movement in Ireland by a dissemination of its literature, educate the working class of this country into a knowledge of Socialist principles and prepare them to cooperate with the workers of all other races, colours and nationalities into the emancipation of Labour'.

The ideals espoused by the ISF echoed the Wobbly cry for 'One Big Union'. After two decades of peak immigration, the 1910 United States census reported

approximately 13.5 million foreign-born respondents, about 14.6% of the total population. The IWW courted immigrant workers, excluded by many craft unions and the powerful American Federation of Labor (AFL). The ISF also confronted tensions amongst Irish-Americans related to race and class, and weaved radical socialism into the political network that funnelled ideas, funds and arms across the Atlantic in the name of Irish independence since the mid-nineteenth century.

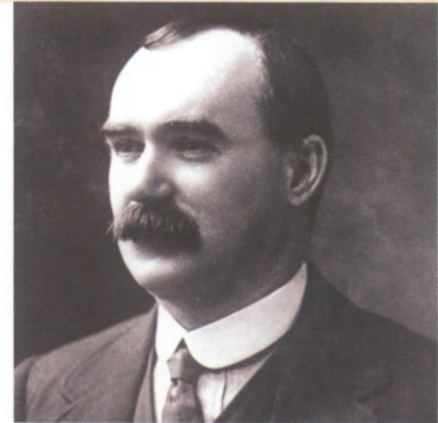
'No Irish socialists!'

In a 1907 speech, New York City mayor and Democrat George B. McClellan Jr reportedly declared that 'There are Russian socialists and Jewish socialists and German socialists! But, thank God! There are no Irish socialists!' Connolly answered McClellan's challenge on the pages of *The Harp*, the ISF monthly published between 1908 and 1910. He urged Irish-Americans to shun their historical ties to the Democratic Party and its 'invertebrate Irish middle class politicians' who brandished their ancestry only on election day. Emigration failed to free Irishmen from imperialist exploitation, Connolly argued—Irish longshoremen on the docks in New York still worked for British shipping magnates with offices on nearby Wall Street. He implored his readers to reject their 'aggressive insularity' and organise with 'that Polack, whose advent in the workshop you are taught to view with such disfavor'. Connolly returned to Ireland in 1910, but his blend of socialism and Irish separatism reverberated with Flynn as she recruited for the Wobblies.



Above: *The Harp*, monthly newspaper of the Irish Socialist Federation between 1908 and 1910. In its pages James Connolly (right) responded to the assertion of New York City Mayor George B. McClellan that 'there are no Irish socialists'.

Flynn reminded her audiences that they were not strangers to labour struggles in their motherlands, and they must redefine 'Americanism' to meet their demands for economic justice and reflect their growing presence in American society. After the foundation of the ISF, she travelled to Wobbly strongholds in western states, organising in Missoula, Montana, and Spokane, Washington. By 1912 the IWW had gained traction in eastern cities such as Lawrence, Massachusetts, and captivated the mainstream press with its 'revolutionary tactics'. That March, the *New York Times* published a photo of Flynn under the headline 'The New Socialism that Threatens the Social System' in their exposé of the



Wobblies. *Times* journalist Charles Willis Thompson described how the Wobblies antagonised 'old-fashioned labour organisations' such as the AFL and progressive-minded legislators by denouncing capitalism and party politics.

In her Paterson speech during the prolonged silk workers' strike in May 1913, Flynn proclaimed that 'the newspapers say that a great number of you are going back to work . . . I don't believe it. It is a lie, for neither the English-speaking or the Italian workers are scabs in Paterson'. Labour in the Silk City was split between mostly English-speaking ribbon-weavers and more recent Jewish and Italian arrivals working as silk-weavers and dyers. About a third of Paterson's workforce—men, women and children—had walked off shop floors that February. They opposed the 'speedup system', which increased the output of each weaver without a raise in wages. Other demands included an eight-hour day, a minimum wage of \$12 per week (versus the average income of \$10 per week) and the elimination of restrictions on union membership. Mill-owners responded by organising a flag day that March, festooning Paterson with stars and stripes to appeal to the patriotism of immigrants to induce them to return to work. In retaliation, the strikers carried signs that read 'We wove the flag, we dyed the flag, we live under the flag, but we won't scab under the flag!'

Background

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn was born in 1890 in New Hampshire. Her mother, Anne Gurley, emigrated from Loughrea to Boston in 1877; her father, Thomas Flynn, was born to Irish immigrants living in Maine in 1859. Her father was an itinerant cartographer during her youth, bringing her into contact with the everyday brutalities of America's industrial centres. In *The rebel girl*, her 1955 autobiography, Flynn recalled the dangers of the New England mills—'Safety devices were still unheard of . . . A girl's long hair had been caught in the unguarded machine and was literally scalped.' The family settled in a grim cold-water flat in the South Bronx in 1900. Her parents imbued her with a devotion to Irish separatism and an appreciation for Irish participation in American labour organisations, including the Knights of Labor and the Western Federation of Miners. Flynn read Marx, Upton Sinclair and Edward Bellamy, and attended meetings organised by local German socialists eager to attract their English-speaking neighbours. At sixteen she delivered her first lecture to the Harlem Socialist Club (on women and socialism) and was first arrested (for lecturing without a permit and blocking traffic on Broadway). She also joined the IWW that year. After her encounter with radical socialism in the tenements, her horizons broadened beyond the South Bronx and the struggle for Irish freedom. But Irish separatism still motivated Flynn and inspired her commitment to leading a diverse, polyglot labour movement through the shared language of industrial unionism.



Pageant in Madison Square Garden

With Paterson only fifteen miles from Manhattan, the IWW readily publicised their activities to mainstream journalists and radicals alike. They criticised police for violating free speech rights by arresting Wobblies for 'inciting to riot' and workers for 'unlawful assemblage' at mass meetings. Approximately 3,000 were arrested during the strike. Flynn coordinated events to expose the situation in Paterson. In April 1913 the IWW launched a scheme to temporarily 'deport' 100 strikers' children to the care of sympathetic families and physicians in New York. On May Day, c. 10,000 men, women and children marched to Paterson city hall to 'call the bluff' of Mayor Andrew McBride, who had promised relief to the needy. The Wobblies organised a pageant in Madison Square Garden on 7 June, where over 1,000 strikers re-enacted events in the Silk City. Fifteen thousand watched this spectacle, featuring a mass funeral procession for slain comrades with red carnations and songs in English, German and Italian. Conceived by Greenwich Village bohemians and labour leaders, the pageant gave the Wobblies exposure but drained their coffers. As Flynn later remarked, 'then came the grand finale—no money'.

Left: 'To hell with your laws . . .', says a Paterson silk manufacturer to 'Uncle Sam' in a 7 June 1913 cartoon in the IWW's newspaper, *Solidarity*.

Below: The pageant staged by the Wobblies in Madison Square Garden, New York, on 7 June 1913, when over a thousand strikers re-enacted events in the Silk City.

Flynn regarded the Paterson strike as a failure, echoing many who witnessed the Dublin Lockout. It ended on 29 July 1913, with a shop-by-shop settlement restricting negotiations to the individual mills. In a speech to the New York Civic Club Forum the following January, Flynn described 'English-speaking conservative elements' in the strike committee as a 'complicating factor' who strained finances and morale. On the Dublin Lockout, Flynn commented: 'In Ireland today there is a wonderful strike going on and they are standing it beautifully. Why? Because they have had half a million dollars since the thirty-first of August (five months) given into the relief fund, and every man that goes on the picket line has food in his stomach and some kind of decent clothes on his back.' She contrasted this with the 'tragedy of the Paterson strike', a 'solid phalanx being cut up into 300 pieces'. Despite her praise for the Dublin strikers, her disappointment would have struck a familiar chord with many in Liberty Hall.

In a song that he wrote for Flynn in 1911, the American labour icon Joe Hill declared that 'The only and thoroughbred lady is the Rebel Girl'. As Hill's lyric suggests, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn offered an alternative American pedigree by promoting the radical Wobbly ideal of 'One Big Union' irrespective of sex, ethnicity or creed. Yet, rather than completely rejecting nationalism in favor of syndicalism and working-class solidarity, she courted the sense of patriotism amongst immigrant workers, just as Connolly had espoused it in his brand of Irish socialism.

The 1913 Lockout is perceived as a prelude to the Easter Rising. Similarly, the activities of Flynn and the IWW presaged the debates over 'Americanism' amongst the foreign-born in the United States on the eve of the Great War. As Flynn described the Paterson strikers, 'they have no more use for the state. To them the Statue of Liberty is personified by the policeman and his club'. **HI**

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Further reading

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- E. Gurley Flynn, *The rebel girl: an autobiography* (New York, 1973).

